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ABSTRACT

As may be seen in a brief examination of several characters and scenes in Mario Puzo's "The Godfather," analysis of ethnic literature must focus on both the cultural and the linguistic aspects of literature. Often the syntactic structure reflects the structure of the native language of the writer, while word choice frequently depends upon a word-for-word translation of an idiom or even of a single word from that language. Furthermore, the characters' reactions, customs, and attitudes, as well as their moral and ethical viewpoints, are derived from this ethnic background. Thus, to fully understand and appreciate an ethnic work, the literary analyst must be familiar with the work's ethnic background and should then investigate its faithfulness to its cultural matrix. (JM)

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Language, Culture and the Specialist in Ethnic Literature

Robert J. Di Pietro

[talk delivered December 27, 1976 at the Ninety-first Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association of America, New York]

As it is often said, good literature can be read with varying degrees of understanding and appreciation. As readers, we are all especially pleased when what we are reading touches some tender chord of familiarity. The body of writings which we have come to label as 'ethnic' is likely to touch us in some very intimate places. Even though I am hurt that Mario Puzo had to write a novel as potentially defaming to Italian Americans as The Godfather, I admit that every page of it touches me in a way that Tom Sawyer could never do. While I can find much to identify with in Mark Twain's writings, Puzo's characters are so real to me that I am almost embarassed to read about them.

Those of us professionally involved with literature in some way are bound to give some thought to the why and how writers achieve their artistry. As ethnic literature specialists, we place an even more onerous burden on ourselves--that of bestowing the label 'ethnic' on certain pieces of literature and not on others. I think that both the key to how the writer becomes a great one and the rationale for labeling some writings as 'ethnic' are simple in nature. Writers become great because they know how to use language. The key to defining ethnic literature resides with the reading public itself.

You may argue that while great writers are indeed skilful users of language, how far can this observation take us in our literary analysis? Admittedly not very far--but it does bring our attention around to where I think it should be, namely on the language--the raw material of the writer.

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In each of us resides an artist. Even if our inherent talents never break out into the open by themselves, we do use them to evaluate what we see, hear and read that comes from those of us who are more productive with their artistry. Without these resident talents, there would be no communication between creative producer and appreciative receiver. Literature, then, depends on communication and communication, in turn, needs language.

You see that I am suggesting a semiotic model to how literature works. You may not agree with it at all, or you may see some value in it. Whatever the case, hear me out and use my linguist's training to your own advantage.

Before we proceed with the points on language use and my assertion that the ethnic specialist should know as much as possible about the linguistic and cultural background of the writer, let me pick up the claim I made earlier that the key to defining ethnic literature resides in the reader. For me, The Godfather is not ethnic literature. It is simply literature--but remember who is saying this. I am, myself, an ethnic and, even more specifically, an ethnic of the group that Puzo is writing about. I do not see the scenarios strung out through The Godfather as theatrical stunts put on for the benefit of intellectuals on weekend shopping tours in Little Italy. The events in the novel are genuine to me because the people involved in them are genuine. The novel is no more ethnic to me than is the food I eat at home. As far as I am concerned, the Thanksgiving turkey with its cranberry sauce is ethnic and baked lasagna is not.

Regardless of whether we are Italian ethnics or not, it is important to dig down into the roots of what we are reading, to expand our own

consciousness. Just recently I found myself overwhelmed with Alex Haley's new book, Roots. To trace his ancestry back to Africa, Haley had nothing more to go on than a few words in the language of his Mandingo forebearers which were carried across the Atlantic centuries ago and passed down through generations of slavery in America. Many more features of the Italian language are evident in the writings of Italian American authors. The impact of Italian on Puzo's English is, in fact, comparable to the influence of Sicilian on the great Italian writer, Giovanni Verga (see, for example, his I Malavoglia). Here is an example from The Godfather: on pages 17-18, Michael Corleone's WASP girlfriend is described as follows:

> She was too thin, she was too fair, her face was too sharply intelligent for a woman, her manner too free for a maiden. Her name, too, was outlandish to their ears; she called herself Kay Adams (italics mine).

The syntax in this paggage is very Italian in structure. While it is Puzo, himself, who is writing, the description sounds as if it were coming directly from the guests at Connie's wedding. The southern Italian dislike for thin women comes out. So does their suspicion that all donne americane are sexually promiscuous. The culmination is in the phrase, "she called herself Kay Adams". "To call oneself something" is a word-for-word translation (or calque, if you want a more techniqal term) of the Italian idiom chiamarsi which means not 'to call oneself' but simply 'to be named'. I can only conjecture how readers not familiar with this Italian expression are interpreting the passage. Perhaps they find in it some doubt that the girl's name is really Kay Adams. Yet the linguistic evidence, once it is known, points in the opposite direction. Hearing that the girl's name is an 'American' is best interpreted

as the final confirmation that all the guests' fears were justified. She is exactly what they thought she was.

A much more startling effect of Italian reaction is conveyed on the very first page of the novel, when Amerigo Bonasera expresses his agreement with the judge's verbal lashing of the young punks who beat up his daughter. He mutters to himself, "Animals, animals". A linguistically more accurate expression in English would have been "beasts, beasts". However, Puzo evokes Bonasera's background by having him use the closest literal counterpart to Italian animali. In fact, the text carries the word in italics on the next page, spelled animales and obviously to be pronounced in Italian with an English plural--as if to imply that Bonasera had gone even deeper into his psyche to pull out more hatred for these despicable men who assaulted his daughter.

Similarly, I find very Italian Sonny Corleone's reaction to the FBI agents' taking down license-plate numbers at the wedding. Sonny exclaims, "those lousy bastards, they don't respect anything" (p. 19). He might have said it just as well in Italian: "Maledetti bastardi! Non hanno rispetto per niente!". This word rispetto is a key one. The literal translation into English is clumsy. Why 'respect'? Why should the FBI 'respect' a wedding? A more comfortable expression in English would be "lack of consideration". Quite possibly a mainstream American might have reacted by calling the agents, "inconsiderate bastards". The choice of "inconsiderate" over "disrespectful" would have amounted to a devesting of the great moral and ethical values which are associated with marriage in traditional Italian culture. A visit from the FBI at one's wedding might strike the nonethnic American as inopportune or, at worse, discourteous, but hardly disrespectful. I remember my own

recent reaction to a neighbor who organized a garage sale on the same day that the daughter of another neighbor was getting married. My proper mainstream neighborhood was witness to a strange mix of well-dressed wedding guests arriving with smartly wrapped gifts and nondescript bargain hunters carrying off miscellaneous pieces of attic junk. How oddly American it all seemed and, in my unreconstructed ethnic view, what a gross display of disrespect. Yet, the only remark the mother of the bride was able to muster was, "How inconsiderate!". A case of Anglo-Saxon understatement? Quite possibly. But of one thing I was certain: the Corleone's neighbors would never have been so disrespectful to have held a garage sale on the day of Connie's wedding.

Returning to that wedding, we read that Don Vito Corleone welcomed his old friend, the baker, with a glass of Strega. Not only did the mention of this amber liqueur bring back memories of my own childhood but it also drove home yet another point relating to the significance of linguistic and cultural awareness for the ethnic specialist. While Italians drink almost as much wine as the French, they do not use it as a socializing drink. Among Italians, wine is a table beverage, used as a complement to food. For socializing, Italians use a cordial of some sort. Strega is only one of many that my own parents kept in a cabinet together with little cut-crystal glasses, ready to be taken out and used when company arrived. How does the reader who is not of my ethnic extraction react to this scene with the baker? Perhaps the little glass of Strega goes unnoticed. Or perhaps the reader thinks, here is another one of those peculiar Italian habits. The analyst, however, cannot afford to dismiss the matter so lightly. An important part of what literary specialists do is to investigate how faithful a piece is to its cultural

matrix. Perhaps I should consider myself lucky to have been born into the Italian ethnic group. My accident of birth makes the understanding of linguistic and cultural themes much easier when they are related to Italians. Otherwise I would have to do a good deal of reading about the language and customs of those who trace their origins back to Italy.

By the same token, the Don's visit to Genco in the hospital brought no cultural surprises to me. Genco has cancer. The doctor is someone named Kennedy who doesn't understand his patient or his patient's family: "Dr. Kennedy looked over the large group with exasperation. Didn't these people realize that the man inside was dying and dying in torturous pain? It would be much better if everyone let him die in peace" (p. 45). But"much better" for whom? Death alone in an antiseptic public institution run by strangers may be a northern European's preferred entrance into Valhalla but it is certainly not for the Sicilian family and friends of Genco. After the Don ascertains from Dr. Kennedy that Genco is truly on his death-bed, he dismisses the doctor with the following words: "Then there is nothing more for you to do...we will take up the burden. We will comfort him. We will close his eyes. We will bury him and weep at his funeral and afterwards we will watch over his wife and daughters".

I have read treatises written by sociologists who bemoan the so-called 'amoralism' of Italian families who 'look out' for themselves. I cannot resist the temptation to observe that in a society such as ours where the astronomical cost of health care frightens even doctors, the Don's promise to take care of Genco's family is an option that more people in the community ought to consider.

Getting back to our central topic, it has been noted by a number of health specialists that cultural attitudes toward care of the sick and elderly are tied to one's sense of ethnicity and one's use of an ethnic language (see, for example, R. B. Edgerton and M. Karno, "Mexican-American Bilingualism and the Perception of Mental Illness", Archives of General Psychiatry, vol. 24, no. 3 (March, 1971), p. 286-290). Puzo's Don Vito may be involved in nefarious activities of all kinds, but he is also a godfather, a padrino in all the good senses the word has for Italian Catholics.

With an appreciation of the cultural values and language background of all of Puzo's characters, the novel takes on a dimension far greater than its superficial cops-and-robbers theme. It is transformed into the saga of an ethnic family bent on crime which acculturates towards the mainstream. This family learns how to crush its enemies by adopting the best organizational principles of American business. Having said all that, I admit to being no closer to explaining how writers become great. I have only observed some of the ways they use language to communicate with their readers and, in the process, get themselves labelled as "ethnic" writers. Maybe that should be enough.